

Music to My Ears by Gene McCoy

Musical taste is purely subjective. It boils down to personal preference. Personally, I like all music that exalts the Lord and edifies His church. I can hear someone screaming, “**You like rap?!!**” Read that last sentence again. I said “**music!**”

Nothing is gained by arguing about something that is subjective. It is my observation that much of the discussion in church circles about music in worship is about style and presentation, not content.

For example, one of the big complaints about more recent music has to do with lyrical repetition. But there are some hymns that could compete in that department! “I Am Happy in the Service of the King” could top the list.

That a song leader chooses to sing a song multiple times should not reflect negatively upon the song or the genre. The same applies to the complaint that the congregation is required to stand so long, or that the volume level is oppressive, or that it is difficult to sing. Some of the hymns are difficult to sing. A good example of that is “Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face,” that has an octave jump, the top end of which usually comes out sounding like a cat fight! Our national anthem is not the easiest song to sing, either.

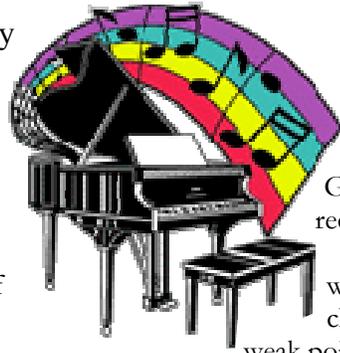
The fact is that more recent music has gotten a bum rap (excuse the pun) because of its presentation by leaders displaying poor judgment. Let us avoid this error by evaluating musical worship in a more objective manner. Consider some thoughts this writer has not seen presented in this discussion, and develop an appreciation for the variety or diversity of our musical expression of worship.

STRENGTHS OF THE HYMNS

It would be unfair and unfortunate to eliminate any genre (style, type) of music, thereby impoverishing the church. We should enjoy the strong contributions of various musical styles.

The hymns provide an emphasis upon the Christian’s hope and heaven that is not so prominent in the newer music. When preparing a message to comfort those who are grieving, the preacher will often recite the lyrics, not to recent songs, but to old hymns, such as “Does Jesus Care?”

The hymns provide a much broader selection of topics from which to develop a musical theme. Whereas praising God is prominent in all forms of church music, the hymns are strong in the areas of exhortation and theology. We are dependent upon the hymns to develop the themes of serving, working, and faithfulness. The theology contained



in “Rock of Ages,” “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” is unparalleled in recent lyrics.

To abandon this music would be a disservice to the church. But it does have its

weak points, at least in comparison to recent compositions. Among them is the general characterization that the hymns are songs **about** faith in God, as opposed to expressing faith and love **to** God. This is what some have described as horizontal as contrasted with vertical worship. Recent music highlights the latter.

STRENGTHS OF RECENT MUSIC

The vertical nature of recent music is one characteristic, we think, that makes it uncomfortable for the older set. But it is actually one of its strengths. Is the observation valid that musical style and lyrical content is progressively preparing us for heavenly worship? Will the music in heaven resemble the intimate style and lyrical content of modern music more than the songs of previous generations? That is an interesting question, the answer to which only time — I mean, eternity — will tell.

One of the strong points favoring current music is its use of the Biblical text for lyrics. Reading the Bible will frequently bring to mind modern melodies to which the text has been set.

A musical strength enjoyed by recent compositions is the use of chords and progressions that relate well to modern ears. The rhythm and meter also helps younger ears connect more readily to the lyrical content.

Accompanying the newer music (pun intended) has been the advent of “praise bands” and “praise teams,” as they are called. To the extent that they accompany and not overpower the singing, these have enhanced the message — especially in the ears of those who were raised on something other than orchestra, choir, easy listening, and opera music.

WHY A GENERATIONAL PREFERENCE

The *music of the culture* may explain the generational divide in the *music of the church*. Wasn’t there a time when hymn books and our beloved hymns were rejected as worldly? The music of some was borrowed from saloons! Those who contend for the hymns alone have no room to criticize modern music that resembles current culture!

We need to recognize and accept the generational differences reflected in our various

musical expressions, and then celebrate the diversity. For example, the Greatest Generation (WWII) is more cerebral and stoic than the modern generation that is more sensitive to feelings. That explains why songs recently written are more intimate than the hymns.

We need both the old and the new. The emotional expression of one is complemented by the cerebral expression of the other. The differences in beat, rhythm and meter should be celebrated as reflecting the diversity among God's people, much as we would when visiting the mission field.

Familiarity is probably a big factor in this discussion. We are not comfortable with anything

that is unfamiliar. The more familiar we become with a song or style of music, the more comfortable we are with it. If you cannot embrace a particular style of music, at least resist the temptation to hold it at arm's length or to dismiss it out of hand.

We recognize that we have made some generalizations in this discussion, and that exceptions could be cited. But for the most part, we think our characterizations are accurate and fair.

We also recognize that there is a great deal of overlapping in lyrical content between the older and newer music. But we have accentuated the unique strengths of each to make the case that each has a place in our worship.